

# RACISM: A SYMPTOM OF THE NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

Carl C. Bell, MD  
Chicago, Illinois

**Despite the criticism that psychoanalytic models are not applicable to social phenomena, knowledge of the dynamics of narcissistic development aids in understanding a particular kind of racist individual. Specifically, racist attitudes may be indicative of a narcissistic personality disorder or of a regression to primitive narcissistic functioning secondary to environmental forces. The differentiation between the narcissistic racist, the stress-induced racist, and the socially misinformed racist is discussed utilizing clinical paradigms discovered in psychotherapy. Life experiences and religion are discussed as possible aids in the transformation of primary narcissism into secondary narcissism.**

In reviewing the literature on racism, one finds a wide spectrum of etiologic agents cited as the cause for racist attitudes in individuals. At one end of the spectrum is the view that racist attitudes are induced by enculturation while at the other are those who feel that psychologic (personality and intrapsychic) factors are responsible for the racist attitude.<sup>1,2</sup> What is believed to be a more reasonable or eclectic approach, is also found in the literature.<sup>3-6</sup> The proponents of the model of racism as a social ill in which cultural patterns are institutionalized and internalized by socialization feel that the solution to racism lies in politics and social change, and not in the interpretive tech-

niques of psychiatry.<sup>7,8</sup> Despite the fact that values and attitudes can be generated from social indoctrination, it is also recognized that while a person is a product of society he is also a product of his individuality. So, the questions remain: "What characteristics cause an individual to accommodate to racist views which are in direct opposition to the value of a democratic free society?" "What causes a person raised in a racist family and social group to genuinely relinquish racist values and practice brotherhood?" "What, for instance, causes a young man to commit atrocities against women and children on the basis of their being in a different racial group when that young man had never previously demonstrated such viciousness earlier in his life?" I suspect that the answers to these questions lie in the consideration of the vicissitudes of narcissism and its effect on the individual and the individual's response to groups and stress.

## THE NARCISSISTIC RACIST

There are as many different reasons for the racist act as there are etiologic agents proposed for the causes of racism. However, on examining the intrapsychic dynamics of such behavior one clear feature is manifest—a lack of empathy for the supposed inferior race. Already it has been noted that the individual's psychopathology influences his response to group pressure and that in many instances racist beliefs can serve psychopathic needs.<sup>4</sup> It should be clear that there is a kind of racist individual who reveals the same type of psychopathology (narcissistic personality disorder<sup>9,10</sup> or borderline syndrome<sup>11,12</sup>) found in the murderer, child molester, rapist, child abuser, and a sadomasochist.<sup>13</sup> The narcissistic racist is a person whose racism is primarily a symptom of a

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Presented at the 132nd Annual Meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, Chicago, May 1979. From the Division of Behavioral and Psychodynamic Medicine, Jackson Park Hospital and Medical Center, Chicago, Illinois. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Carl C. Bell, Division of Behavioral and Psychodynamic Medicine, Jackson Park Hospital and Medical Center, 7531 South Stony Island Avenue, Chicago, IL 60649.

narcissistic personality disorder (a personality disorder diagnosis does not relieve the person of the responsibility for his behavior in terms of the legal consequences of that behavior). The personality disorder underlying this form of racism has been examined by Allport,<sup>1</sup> Adorno,<sup>2</sup> and others.

Kohut states, "All instances of narcissistic rage have, nevertheless, certain features in common because they all arise from the matrix of a narcissistic or pre-narcissistic view of the world. It is this archaic mode of experience which explains the fact that those who are in the grip of narcissistic rage show a total lack of empathy toward the offender."<sup>14</sup> Clearly this is the state of being of the individual involved in any overt act of racism. The third *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* contains a description of the narcissistic personality disorder which is also classic of the racist individual and the criteria are the following:

- A. Grandiose sense of self importance or uniqueness (this fits the racist's supposed racial superiority)
- B. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love (clearly, the wish to dominate another racial group fits here as well as the Malthusian principles of the rightness of whiteness and the Teutonic standard of white beauty<sup>15</sup>)
- C. Exhibitionistic: Requires constant attention and admiration (such as wearing white sheets or swastikas)
- D. Responds to criticism, indifference of others, or defeat with either cool indifference or with marked feelings of rage, inferiority, shame, humiliation, or emptiness (the phenomena of white backlash and the feeling that blacks are being pushy)
- E. Two of the following:
  1. Lack of empathy: Inability to recognize how others feel (racists could not possibly recognize how their "inferiors" feel otherwise they would not behave in such an unempathic manner)
  2. Entitlement: Expectation of special favors with reactions of surprise and anger when others don't comply (racists are always surprised and angry when the "inferiors" don't accede to their wishes)
  3. Interpersonal exploitiveness: Takes advantage of others to indulge his own desires or for self-aggrandizement, with disregard for the personal integrity and rights of others.
  4. Relationships characteristically vacillate between the extremes of overidealization and devaluation (the characterization of blacks as being primitive and yet extreme amounts of cultural plagiarism, ie, sun tan phenomenon)<sup>16</sup>

Kohut reports that "the most violent forms of narcissistic rage arise in those individuals for whom a sense of absolute control over an archaic environment is indispensable . . ."<sup>14</sup> It is this need for a sense of absolute control which the racist feels justifies his self-given right to violate another's "territory" by either a physical attack, segregation, or discrimination—the "territory" (in this country) being, for example, the individual's right to adequate health care, education, and housing wherever he can afford it.

### THE STRESS-INDUCED RACIST

It has long been said that man's greatest psychological achievement is to come to grips with his own limitations, the greatest limitation being that no one lives forever. This issue is clearly related to the vicissitudes of narcissism and facing this issue prematurely (ie, before there is an opportunity for the transformation of primary narcissism into secondary narcissism) is probably enough to induce regression to an earlier phase of narcissistic development.

In examining patients who have suffered residual consequences from exposure to life or death circumstances, there is clear evidence that most of the patients suffered a regression to a narcissistic level of functioning. A life or death struggle provides sufficient stress to cause a number of patients the same type of difficulty one of Kohut's patients demonstrated. Specifically, the patient's "insufficiently idealized superego could not provide him with an adequate internal supply of narcissistic sustenance and he needed external approbation in order to maintain his narcissistic balance. He became, therefore, inordinately dependent on idealized figures in his environment whose praise he craved."<sup>14</sup> Angela Davis points out "Because it was drummed into the heads of US soldiers that they were confronting an inferior race, they could believe that raping Vietnamese women was a necessary soldierly duty."<sup>17</sup>

In practice one can differentiate a transient form of narcissistic rage (characterized by "the need for revenge, for righting a wrong, for undoing a hurt by whatever means"<sup>14</sup>) which was a product of a stressful situation and which given time and narcissistic gratification can allow a reestablishment of narcissistic equilibrium.<sup>18</sup> It is this transient rage which occasionally takes the form of

transient racist behavior which involves either stress or the need to be mirrored and the need to be grandiose.

Thus, there are some forms of racist behavior which occur in response to stress rather than due to a chronic personality disorder characterized by chronic racist acts.

### THE SOCIALLY MISINFORMED RACIST

A great number of studies point to a socially induced form of racism indicating that racism in this country is institutionalized and as such can be adopted by persons in the culture who are not necessarily suffering from individual psychopathology. Certain racist individuals have a cognitive schemata which causes them to believe that their race is superior and that the subjugation of the other races by means of discrimination and segregation is no more inhumane than discrimination toward and segregation of animals.

The moral hypocrisy and ethical inconsistency experienced by the socially misinformed racist is felt to be a source of cognitive dissonance which can induce a change in the cognitive schemata which says that the racist's race is superior. Thus, eliminating racism by making discrimination and segregation illegal has been attempted. The subtle intention of this jurisprudence is that by forcing people together and guaranteeing minorities their rights, socially misinformed racists have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with different racial types. Theoretically, such an education would eventually eliminate a great number of myths about racial differences, and thus destroy the base of the social aspects of racism. Yet and still, people tenaciously cling to their racist ideas which leads one to suspect that there is an intrapsychic dynamic playing a part in their beliefs.

Allport discusses the phenomenon of the demagogue and the types of people who tend to adopt their philosophy because of an internal need to be associated with a powerful being. Kohut is describing this same need from a psychoanalytic perspective when he states that "Yearning to find a substitute for the missing (or insufficiently developed) psychic structure, such persons are forever seeking, with addiction-like intensity, and often through sexual means (the clinical picture

may be that of a perversion), to establish a relationship to people who serve as stand-ins for the omnipotent idealized self-object, ie, to the archaic precursor of the missing inner structure. In everyday life and in the analytic transference the self-esteem of such persons is therefore upheld by their relationship to archaic self-objects."<sup>19</sup> In the black community this type of person is referred to someone who always needs a co-signer to make a decision.

Emerson stated "The institution is but the shadow of a man." If the man behind the institution is a narcissist of the grandiose fashion (as was Hitler) then a racist institution is bound to be established. Kohut describes such people: "They seem to combine an absolute certainty concerning the validity of their ideas with an equally absolute lack of empathic understanding for large segments of feelings, needs, and rights of other human beings and for the values cherished by them. They understand the environment in which they live only as an extension of their own narcissistic universe."<sup>19</sup>

Thus, there would appear to be two types of socially misinformed racists: those with an underlying narcissistic personality disorder which requires the merger with the archaic self-object in order for the racist's unempathic feelings and behavior to emerge, and those who are simply socially misinformed at an early age and who with adequate exposure may be placed in a sufficient state of cognitive dissonance to cause that individual to relinquish his ignorant beliefs.

### RELIGION AND LIFE'S EXPERIENCES IN TRANSFORMING PRIMARY NARCISSISM

Persons who lack racist attitudes also tend to lack features of unmodified narcissism. In his chapter "Tolerant Personality," Allport describes the character structure most opposed to the prejudiced personality by virtue of his empathic ability and self-insight. This type of person has what the narcissist lacks. He does not need to have some "great person" co-sign his behavior and self-esteem. In discussing the man who has attained an average state of mental health Kohut states,

"And, in particular, there will again be empathic contact with others which will prevent the development of a

sense of absolute moral superiority over the fellow man. When comparing his own performance with the performance of others, the judgement of the nonmessianic person will be influenced by his empathic understanding of the fact that others, too, experience limited failures and success in the moral sphere, and thus no unrealistic feelings develop that the self is perfect and that the selves of other people are in essence corrupt."<sup>14</sup>

To be able to relinquish attitudes, a cognitive schemata, or a racist indoctrination a person has to be fairly comfortable with regard to narcissistic balance. It is necessary to be aware that our thought processes do not belong to the core of our selves in order to attain an enlightened state. The ability to see one's thoughts as not self (insight from introspection) is related to the transformation of narcissism with subsequent greater empathic ability and creativity. Inability to do this would explain the fact that despite increased exposure to other races, some whites have still clung to their racist views. If bigots were not so narcissistically attached to their thoughts as part and parcel of their being, they might be able to be creative, defer their judgment, and become aware that the belief that one race is superior or inferior to another is a "red herring."

Just as the capacity for introspection influences the development of insight which in turn aids in the transformation of primary narcissism, the individual's life experiences also influence his/her narcissism. Clearly there are numerous experiences that blacks in this country have which impinge upon their narcissistic development, ie, a black child is twice as likely to die in the first year of life as a white one; the chances that a black child will grow up without his mother is three or four times that of a white child because of the higher rate of maternal mortality; blacks die six years younger than whites; blacks are more likely to die from the leading causes of death than whites; blacks are less likely to be hospitalized; cancer deaths are increasing two times faster for blacks than whites; unemployment rates for blacks have been double those of whites for the past two decades; black family incomes average only 52 percent of white family incomes; less than half of black folks will have a high school diploma; and 27 percent of black families will have incomes below the poverty level.<sup>20,21</sup>

Thus, it should be obvious that blacks face death and annihilation daily which puts special

stress on their coming to grips with the vicissitudes of narcissism. Furthermore, the manner in which blacks deal with the narcissistic vulnerability imposed on them by the racist elements in the American culture varies from time to time and person to person, depending on circumstances and individual development. One negative mechanism which the black American sub-culture and, thus, black individuals use to handle this stress is the individual outburst of narcissistic rage which results in the high homicide and suicide rates in the black community. Another self-limiting style of handling vulnerability is the compensatory grandiosity described by Kenneth B. Clark in "Dark Ghetto."<sup>22</sup> In terms of coping with narcissistic vulnerability through the vehicle of archaic self-object merger it is surprising how many black persons decry social injustice but would rather do business with a white professional than a black one on the basis of having more confidence in the white professional. A less negative form of coping is introspection, as evidenced by the black preoccupation with the "blues" and the comfort obtained by the empathic delivery and content of the songs. Blacks also have a highly developed style of creativity and humor commonly labeled as "soul." These coping styles may be soothing in terms of giving narcissistic gratification and comfort, but blacks who so adapt seldom get proper credit in society. Their development of such coping styles may sometimes preclude and sometimes aid in the development of other styles of coming to grips with narcissistic vulnerability which take the form of social activism. Thus, it is important to mention the transformation of narcissism which aids the individual in the development of initiative which can be used to change the social circumstances responsible for the vulnerability.

Religion, as life's other experiences, is a double-edged sword. It may aid in the transformation of primary narcissism via its emphasis on introspection and attaining altered states of consciousness (the reservoir of creativity). Specifically, compassion, empathy, wisdom, brotherhood, and unity with all living things are desirable results of such practices. Clearly such people as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi reached such a state. However, religion can also be used as a means to gratify the unfilled need of merger with the archaic omnipotent self-object. Thus, it can also serve as a haven for the narcissistic person.

This may have tragic consequences for the followers if the leader should happen to have difficulties with grandiosity as was seen in Jonestown. Be this as it may, this use of religion may be a necessary phase in the transformation of primary narcissism into secondary or modified narcissism.

## CONCLUSION

While there appear to be a number of etiologic factors involved in the genesis of racism there seems to be some justification in understanding racist behavior using the intrapsychic dynamics of narcissistic personality development. There are individuals whose narcissistic development is fixed at an early developmental level. These same individuals express their intrapsychic pathology through the production of various psychic derivatives which are characterized by a total lack of empathic capacity and extreme amounts of narcissistic rage. Racism (the belief of racial superiority, and thereby, the right to dominate other races) is one psychic derivative through which narcissism may manifest itself. Stress-induced racism appears to be related to the shift in narcissistic balance secondary to the attack on the self (by far the greatest narcissistic injury is death) before it has had sufficient time to mellow. It would appear that this form of racism is related not necessarily to a relatively fixed narcissistic imbalance, but rather due to a regressive push.

Finally, apparently there is a kind of racist who may be described as socially misinformed because his/her racist beliefs stem from socialization which has been internalized. Some in this group can be re-educated to a more realistic value system; however, there are others whose need for archaic self-object merger will cause them to do or believe practically anything. Obviously, those in the latter category have a narcissistic personality base under their ardent belief in their racial superiority as advocated by their idealized leaders.

Finally, blacks, because of their vulnerable position, can develop either a grandiosity or destructive narcissistic rage secondary to a total lack of empathy from a racist society or they can psychologically survive by development of their empathy, wisdom, and creativity.

Religion as a means of introspection may be invaluable although it may be a means of merger with the archaic self-object as well. Introspection is one answer for survival in intragroup conflict.

The ability to give and receive empathic linkage satisfies the narcissistic component long enough for the individual to take a break from need-gratification to view the circumstance, thought, or affect in a different light. This produces flexibility and creativity which allows the individual to choose a philosophy of life based on the ideology, not the man who is behind it. As the old Zen proverb states "Follow the path the master took—not the master."

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